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Craig Harris: A man for all seasons

SUSAN SCHAEFER / EDITOR@SWJOURNAL.COM

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Craig Harris. Photo by Susan Schaefer

The economic impact of the creative arts in Minneapolis astonishes. Estimated at \$5 billion in sales, or 9.2 times that of Minneapolis' sports sector according to the recently updated 2018 Creative Vitality Index (CVI), an economic measure used by the city, it has earned our region a lofty place as a national creative mecca.

Behind such stunning statistics toil humans whose creativity and innovation fuel this so-called creative class, dubbed by author Richard Florida. Frequently laboring for the sheer love of their craft, many visual and performing artists, directors, inventors and innovators produce from an inner creative core more likely fueled by passion than personal gain. These makers are marked by an almost holy drive to create — and when their artistry and intent collide, it often yields something extraordinary in its wake.

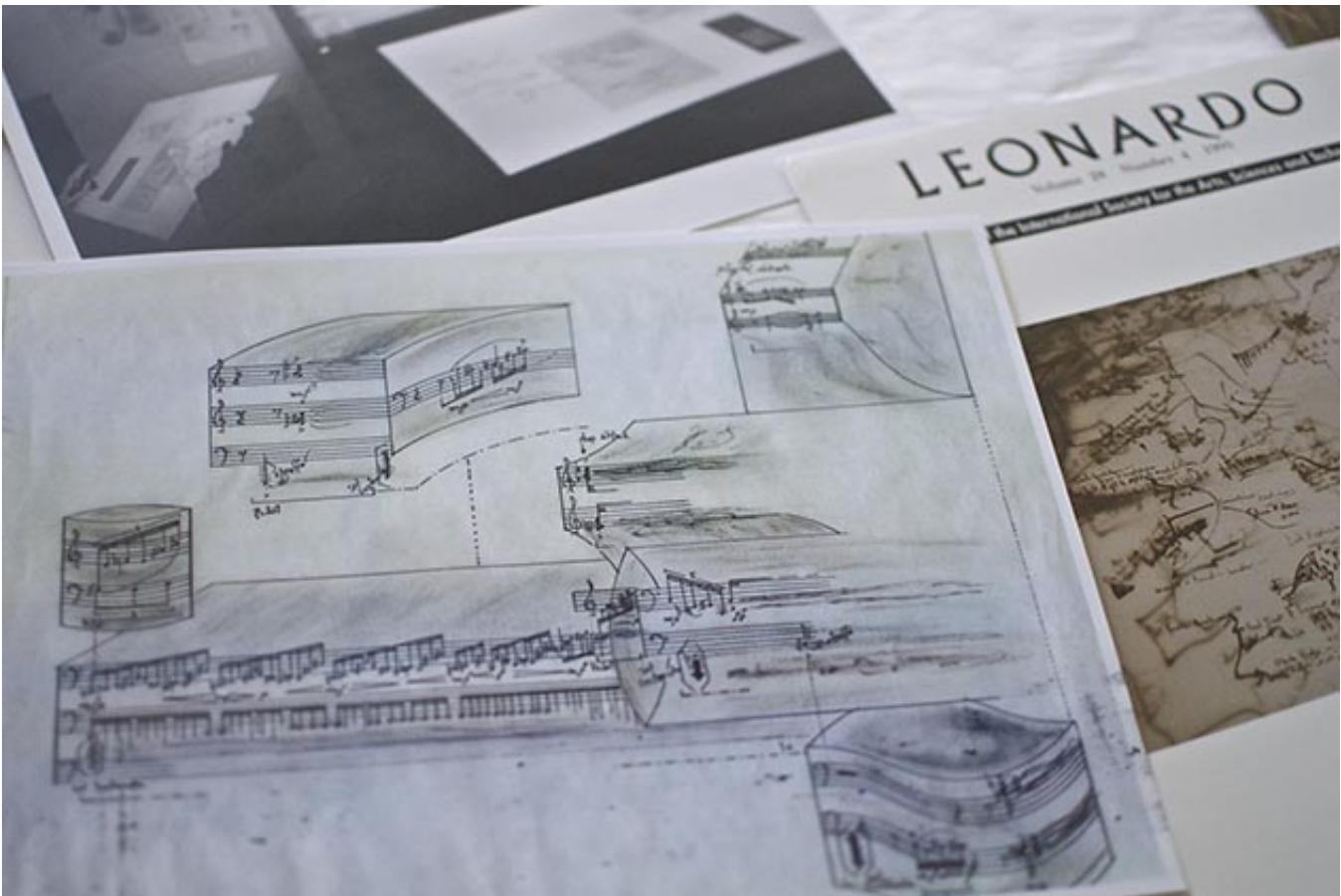


Photo by Susan Schaefer

A man of wit and learning

With no hyperbole, Robert Whittington's 1520 description of his contemporary, Sir Thomas

More, famously fits Craig Harris, a multimedia tour de force who could wear the mantle of Minneapolis Arts Laureate if one existed. Harris “is a man of an angel’s wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons.”

Such a man indeed is Harris: brilliant musician, composer, performer, inventor, arts administrator, husband, father, friend and activist — as prone to an expansive smile as to a deeply furrowed brow.

An artist of Harris’ caliber often focuses on a solo artistic career, but that is antithetical to his steadfast community activist and collaborative principles. Part of what fuels Harris’ right brain creative virtuosity are his astounding left brain logic and strategic abilities, which he has plied generously to support numerous local, national and international cultural institutions.

One such is the Off Leash Area dance theater company and their newly opened Nokomis neighborhood venue, Art Box. Harris has been deeply involved with co-artistic directors Jennifer Ilse and Paul Herwig for many years. Recently, Harris wrote and performed the music for their shows “AfterWind,” “Dancing on the Belly of the Beast” and “The Time Is,” a solo show by Isle to be performed this summer at the Art Box as part of the Right Here Showcase.

Harris’ collaborations run the gamut from artistic to logistic. As executive director of Ballet of the Dolls and initiator of the Ritz Theater renovation, Harris is credited for pioneering the transformation of the surrounding Sheridan neighborhood into a cultural mini-mecca.

His work as interim director of Seward Neighborhood’s Playwright Center, and more recently for such regional arts organizations as Open Eye Figure Theater, Marcy Arts Partnership and Caponi Art Park, encompass the full spectrum of his talents — from strategic planning and executive administration to performing and composing.

“My work is highly collaborative,” states Harris, “bringing many artists together to realize my own multimedia performances, as well as collaborating with many other artists on their projects, such as Ballet of the Dolls, Katha Dance Theater” and Minneapolis favorite, Kira

Obolensky. His collaboration with Zorongo Flamenco Dance Theater to create the immersive visual design for their Cowles Center show “Garden of Names” drew rave reviews.

Harris, along with his wife, multimedia textile artist, costumer and photographic illustrator [Candy Kuehn](#), literally build community with their creativity. Frequent collaborators, Harris and Kuehn have raised two daughters in Marcy Holmes, where they are heralded as fierce champions of social justice and civil rights causes.

Their artistry and activism extend into the greater metro area as well, and the Harris-Kuehn household is a welcoming multi-generational gathering place, typically offering a groaning board of delectables to accompany the inevitable sparked discussions.



Harris performing in his one-person show, “SenseAbility.” Photo by Susan Schaefer

A performance revolutionary

Harris' musical roots power his civic sensibilities.

“From an early age music has been the conduit for me to engage with the world — interpreting what I see and feel,” he stresses.

In his late teens he began envisioning and creating dramatic works that programmatically placed the individual in relation to society to explore issues of self-meaning, responsibility and accountability.

Rather than relying on established theater settings, in recent years he has developed a portable touring infrastructure condensing his well-known multimedia productions to accommodate smaller scale alternative environments. Last October he did just this, piloting his show “SenseAbility” at a new South Minneapolis venue, Squirrel Haus Arts, in conjunction with Art to Change the World’s event, See. Say. DO!

“SenseAbility” is a one-person show where Harris sometimes wears the cloak of the Prophet Elijah, voicing “in-character” perspectives mingled with his own tales of recent explorations in Palestine. This show clearly articulated Harris’ mandate that the arts “engage society to raise the profile of critical issues that affect our future locally and globally.”

While context and content partially explain Harris’ revolutionary musicality, his pioneering of technology and musical notation also plays a significant role.

Raised in Rochester, New York, home of Eastman School of Music and the Rochester Philharmonic, Harris sipped from the frothy brew of late ’50s and ’60s musical influences — classical, popular standards, Broadway musicals, jazz and the emerging world of rock. Schooled as a child in classical piano and music theory classes in Eastman School of Music Community Education program, his first appearance at age 5 on Eastman’s Kilbourn Hall stage was in a rhythm class performance.

A key influence in pointing young Harris towards popular music and improvisation was a talented pianist, Werner Bernstein, who had escaped Nazi Germany during the war. A former medical doctor whose license was not recognized in the states, Bernstein performed at local music clubs and became Harris’ musical improvisational technique teacher.

“This early training had great impact, remaining a constant thread throughout my career,” Harris reminisces.

That “other” Bernstein was also a formidable inspiration.

Harris’ colorful Uncle Richard, now an octogenarian still going strong as a New York City actor and man-about-town, exposed the teenager to rehearsals and concerts of the New York Philharmonic, with the likes of Leonard Bernstein and Pierre Boulez conducting. He and Uncle Richard would frequent wild multimedia happenings and intimate late-night jazz clubs where they were close enough to smell the smoke and whiskey rising off the jazz greats jamming almost within reach.

Harris’ musical trajectory, like his talent, is prodigious. By 18 he had made a key decision about whether to follow classical or jazz music training. Having exercised his chops in rock bands as an early teen, later moving towards jazz, specifically bebop, Harris then discovered abstract improvisational forms that blended elements of “free” jazz with the experimental compositional techniques found in the music of modern classical composers.

“I decided to strengthen my formal classical training in composition so I could bring a solid foundation in both the techniques and history of music to whatever I decided to do,” he explains.



Harris at the Owatonna Arts Center. Photo by Susan Schaefer

So, he moved to Canada to attend the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto, then returned to obtain his graduate degree at Eastman School of Music nine years later. It was there and then that Harris entered the budding musical realm of computer-assisted music and composition. Nothing was the same thereafter.

“It was an emerging field that required the combined, ongoing effort of musicians, engineers, psychoacousticians, theoreticians and many others to create viable new instruments and musical resources,” he clarifies.

During this phase Harris morphed from purely musical to multi-dimensional — multi-tasking to compose and create new music, all the while integrating new sounds with traditional music instruments. To accomplish this he also had to develop new tools for contemporary music analysis, forging new techniques for sound sampling and processing, integrating software systems that were then only available for use on mini-computers in formal institutional settings onto the new world of personal computers.

Needing to find kindred spirits in this quest for new and evolving artforms, Harris joined the International Computer Music Association, where he worked with key leaders in the field to foster communication, research and resource sharing and collaboration through publishing, strategic partnerships and music festivals and conferences. Always at the forefront of several creative waves, including computer music development and the electronic arts evolution, Harris also joined and contributed to the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology.

Harris wryly notes that now, in 2019, the computer-based instruments and resources are significantly better than they were back when he first entered this arena, but are far from his vision.

“It was a humbling experience to realize that my involvement in this process was contributing in a small way to something that would only be realized decades after I leave the planet,” he muses.



A digital drawing by Harris' wife, Candy Kuehn. The couple met in San Francisco in 1988. Submitted image

Love, actually

Harris met his wife Candy Kuehn in 1988 when they were both living in San Francisco. She was an independent artist primarily working in wearable art, and he was deeply involved in the hotbed of the emerging electronic arts world. They intersected at a holiday party. It was an intense encounter that looms legendarily in their now 30-year partnership.

“We had a three-hour, one-on-one exchange followed shortly thereafter by a four-day first date, and have been together ever since,” Harris smiles broadly. “On our first date she told

me about the two girls we were going to have — not as a premonition but as a fact told to me in advance of what then unfolded!”

Kuehn was a Minneapolis native, and with the economic downturn of the early '90s it made sense to relocate back home to friends, family and affordability with those two growing daughters, Maya and Lea.

Harris loved living in San Francisco, yet found the cultural infrastructure supporting the arts in Minnesota to be top-notch. He notes that the metro area “benefits from a cultural ecology that includes small, mid-sized and large arts organizations; musicians working in many genres; dance and theater artists; a philanthropic infrastructure unlike most places in the United States; and an audience that attends a range of work from the popular and traditional to the experimental and innovative.”

Untethered

Harris launched his four-concert series of solo keyboard-based performances on Feb. 12, revisiting and revitalizing music he’s created for dance and theater shows throughout his career and presenting new compositions still in development. The inaugural concert included his keyboard suite, “GONE,” an ‘emotion gallery’ originally created for Off Leash Area, and “ON THE HILL,” an abstract improvisation based on Rita Dove’s poem, “The Hill Has Something to Say.”

“Untether,” the series theme, represents both the artist and audience being “released from tether” to explore musical and emotional terrain together in non-traditional and unexpected ways. The series is a rare opportunity to experience his music in concert form.

The remaining concerts take place on May 14, Sept. 10 and Nov. 12 at 7 p.m. at [Homewood Studios](#), 2400 Plymouth Ave. N.

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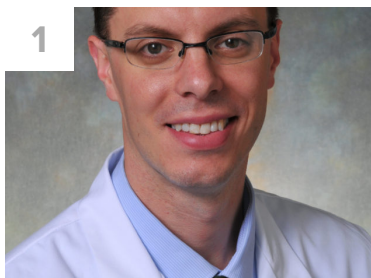
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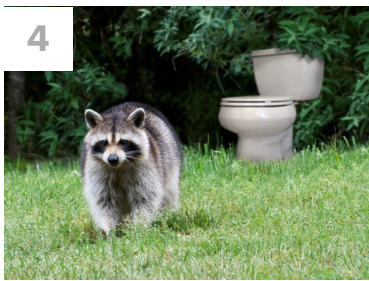
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